

Pop

Paul Anka

LISA VERRICO AT THE ALBERT HALL

★★★★☆

IN HIS 49 years in showbiz, Paul Anka has learnt every trick in the performer's handbook. Admittedly, the ones he picked up in Las Vegas are probably best saved for the casino circuit, but at his only UK concert this year the rest of them underlined his enduring appeal as a slick, strictly disciplined, old-school entertainer.

There was Anka's entrance, from amid the stalls of the Albert Hall, mingling with fans and shaking their hands while he sang *Diana*, his debut hit, without once mis-hitting a note. The result was a standing ovation before he had so much as stepped on stage and a crowd soft as putty in the palm of his hand. Forty minutes later, he was touring the lower circle, standing on seats and posing for photos, dancing cheek-to-cheek with a woman in the front row and leading well-heeled ladies Pied Piper-like in his wake.

In between, he produced cheesy one-liners as though he had just made them up, toured his packed past via a video screen that dropped from the ceiling and closed with shots of him cuddling his grandchildren, and belted out songs from his back catalogue that have long since become standards.

Anka will always be best known as the man who wrote the lyrics of *My Way* for Frank Sinatra, but Donny Osmond's *Puppy Love*, Tom Jones's *She's a Lady* and Buddy Holly's *It doesn't matter Anymore* are among his other songs and were all highlights of a lengthy set bolstered by a classy, ten-piece brass section and tight, energetic band.

Naturally, Anka grasped the chance to chat about his famous friends — the trip he took with Holly, Fats Domino and Chuck Berry, his old pal Sinatra, to whom he dedicated a jazzed-up *Mack the Knife*, and Sammy Davis Jr, who appeared on screen for a beyond-the-grave duet. But his tales were so charmingly told that you couldn't accuse him of boasting.

The reason for the Canadian-born singer's present world tour is last year's *Rock Swings* album — his 125th, he reckons — on which he reworked contemporary tracks into crooner ballads and big band numbers.

"Rock Swings", he shouted, whenever he sashayed into the gold-selling record, first for Van Halen's *Jump*, then Bon Jovi's *It's my Life*.

Both were let down by their lyrics, which didn't merit the close inspection that his careful delivery gave them, but were fun nonetheless. Far better were Anka's versions of Oasis's *Wonderwall* and a fabulous *Smells like Teen Spirit* that even the late Kurt Cobain would have found hard to resist.

Anka promised to return next year for his half-century anniversary.

He smiled when he said it and sounded as if he meant it. But of course he did. The man's a pro.